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VICTIM OF ASSASSIN

Van's 'Last Testament' Hits Northern Clique

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HONG KONG—Three weeks before his assassination in Saigon yesterday, Vietnamese millionaire Tran Van Van, one of the chief aspirants in next year's presidential race, called me to his home.

Van produced a lengthy article he had written in English and wanted to know if an American newspaper would print it.

He said the generals in power in Saigon had refused to allow its publication in South Viet Nam and that he had warned the information minister, Gen. Bao Tri, "you cannot stop me. I will give you two weeks to decide and then I will publish abroad."

Message Clear

Van refused to allow me to take the article away to read. He waited as I skimmed through and made some notes. He said he was uninterested in only excerpts being printed, but would wait until some foreign publication accepted the article in full.

It must have run to several thousand words, page after page of spidery longhand composed in the oblique, verbose parlance of Vietnamese politics.

But the message was clear enough.

It was a bitter denunciation of what Van described as a cabal of North Vietnamese refugees who came south following the Geneva agreement of 1954 and gradually rose through skill and skulduggery to dominate Saigon's government business and press by 1965.

Van wrote that some of them had even succeeded in enlisting the unwitting help of the CIA.

It hardly seemed sinister or unusual at the time, since such melodramatic charges are often bandied about in Saigon.

Van was known as a champion of the cause of the Southern-born Vietnamese against the government of Nguyen Cao Ky, which is dominated by Vietnamese of Northern origin.

In the rush of events, this reporter largely forgot about

the article though it must still be in Van's personal effects.

It should be published now, if only as the murdered leader's last testament.

Van was murdered as he rode in his car to his office. Saigon police a short time later captured Vo Van En, 20, who admitted taking part in the assassination but denied that he fired the fatal shots. He said his only task was to drive the motorcycle from which the shots were fired.

He admitted being a member of the Viet Cong and said he had orders to kill Van, but said he did not know why and did not identify his accomplice.

Both Van and the constituent assembly's elderly chairman, Phan Khac Suu, had campaigned and won on the same ticket by frankly appealing to southern regionalism.

Both had expressed fears in recent days that Ky and his fellow generals were using followers within the assembly to delay the drafting of the constitution past the March deadline so the government could dissolve the assembly and Ky could hold a national referendum for a military-dominated government.

On the eve of the assembly's opening of Sept. 27, Van told me, "I hope to run as president next year, to get the leadership of the civilians to shorten the war through a healthier, more efficient regime."

"We hope to start a dialogue to make a schism in the National Liberation Front, to appeal to its middle-class wing. The liberation is a front of Southerners, while Hanoi runs things from behind, just like the Northerners do in Saigon."

"With some of the Catholics we are working to get these people in the NLF to come back on condition no neo-colonialist is elected as president."

as "Northerners like Ky who came south to try and dominate us like the French did."

Van's article was less surprising for its theme than for the amount of biographical detail about many familiar personalities in Saigon.

One learned, for instance, that out of Ky's classmates in his 1951 graduating class at North Viet Nam's Nam Dinh reserve officers' school, Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang is now running South Viet Nam's revolutionary development effort, Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan runs the police and internal security apparatus, Gen. Bao Tri heads the information ministry and chieu hoi (open arms) program, another general simultaneously runs the 111 Corps, the capital military district and the marines and a fifth is armed forces chief of staff.

All but Ky are described as either open or secret members of the Dai Viet party.

Elite Group

The Dai Viet are a clandestine elite group of mostly north Vietnamese army officers and civil servants who dominated the last French government in Hanoi from 1949 to 1954.

They first came to power in Saigon in February 1965 with former Premier Phan Huy Quat's government, more or less stayed intact when Ky became premier in June 1965.

Among the other Dai Viet personalities whose rise to power after coming south Van chronicled are Dr. Dang Van Sung, who suddenly entered the newspaper business two years ago and now controls the most influential Vietnamese language dailies; Deputy Foreign Minister Bur Diem, who is publisher of the Saigon Post and is slated to be ambassador to Washington; De. Phan Quang Dan, the apparent outstanding liberal in the assembly, who has been responsible for a good share of the delay in completing a constitution; and Dinh Trinh Chinn, a top Ky adviser and former information minister who is a relative of the assembly's 29-year-old constitution-drafting committee chairman.

Could Lead to Crisis

Whoever murdered Van, the danger exists that many Southerners will blame the Dai Viet, since in 1950 in Hanoi they were implicated in more political assassinations than the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Ming. This could precipitate a North-South crisis advantageous to Hanoi.

Van's loss leaves the Southerners with few leaders to rally behind, other than the elderly and frail Suu.

Retired Gen. Tran Van Don, the most prominent Southern soldier, is held suspect by many Southerners for his willingness to seek the support of both Dr. Sung and the Buddhist militant Thich Tri Quang.

To those who knew him, Van's murder is also a grievous personal loss. At 58, gaunt and bushy browed, Van was almost a stereotype of the capitalist landlord, something he himself joked about.

Of Aristocracy

One of the most politically ambitious of the old Cochinese aristocracy, Van was a civilized and humorous man. He was tough, but eminently decent.

Van was also one of the richest and most cultivated men in the country. His suburban Saigon mansion was a veritable museum of priceless Chinese antiquities, including a rare collection of Ming dynasty porcelain.

He is survived by his wife, a teenage son in Saigon and a son and daughter studying in Paris, where Van himself spent 10 years and earned a degree in agricultural engineering.

Although most of his family's vast landholdings in the Mekong Delta were eaten away in Diem's land reform, Van was still collecting rent on 1,100 acres, but reputedly was a